

Disney Firm Cuts Back on Mineral King Plans

Number of Visitors to Area Will Be Curbed by Substituting Cog Railway for Highway

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Walt Disney Productions Wednesday announced scaled-down plans for its proposed recreational development in the Mineral King Valley of the Sierra Nevada.

The main feature of the plan was substitution of a cog railway for a highway, virtually eliminating automobile traffic in the remote mountain area.

The railway, which Disney officials said could be financed with a \$20 million bond issue by Tulare County, would reduce the number of visitors from a previously estimated high of 14,000 persons a day to an average of 4,000 and a peak of 8,000.

Cost of ultimate development had been estimated at up to \$35 million, but Disney officials said now they would initially invest about \$15 million and later determine with the Forest Service what expansion would be suitable.

Instead of 22 ski lifts, present plans call for about 10. Accommodations in the first phase would be for about 2,000 persons, the same as originally planned.

Will Study Plans

The Sierra Club, a conservationist organization which has blocked the development with a court suit, indicated it would study the new proposal but probably will go ahead with plans for further litigation.

E. Cardon Walker, president of Walt Disney Productions, said in Visalia, "The proposal outlined today will allow us to scale down the number of recreational facilities, such as restaurants and ski lifts, which will be necessary at ultimate development."

"The visitors admitted to the area at any one time will be limited to a reasonable number which will guarantee an enjoyable recreational experience for the guest."

Douglas R. Leisz, regional director of the Forest Service which administers the area, said of the railway plan, "We are delighted to support this new concept of a nonpolluting, environmentally compatible access system."

He added, "We are committed to the concept that Mineral King's use must be available to the great body of the public who share its ownership, not limited to a few of the wealthy alone."

Disney officials felt they could not limit the number of visitors coming in on a public highway and had to build facilities to accommodate the peak number.

But access on the 15-mile railway, which would be operated on a non-profit basis by Disney, can be controlled. The fare is estimated at between \$3 and \$4.

The route for the railway, under which power lines will be buried, would follow the existing dirt roadway and pass below the Atwell Mill Grove of redwood trees, "eliminating any possibility" of damaging these trees, Walker said.

The right-of-way needed for the double tracks would be about half the size needed for the proposed highway. The state would still have to improve the road the short distance to Oak Grove but there would be a \$30 million savings to taxpayers because the whole road will not have to be constructed, Walker pointed out.

Ecological Limits

Michael McCloskey, executive director of the Sierra Club, said, "These changes seem to constitute an admission that their previous plans were overblown. By scaling down the development and abandoning the destructive road, the promoters are at last recognizing there are ecological limits to what the area can sustain."

He added, "We will have to study the exact nature of the changes before finally deciding on our course of action but it is likely that we will refile a suit because important principles remain to be determined."

He said these principles of law include the club's right to sue on environmental issues and what development is permissible in a national wildlife refuge, which Mineral King has been designated.



FEATURE OF PLAN—Cog railway would take place of highway.
Times map

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